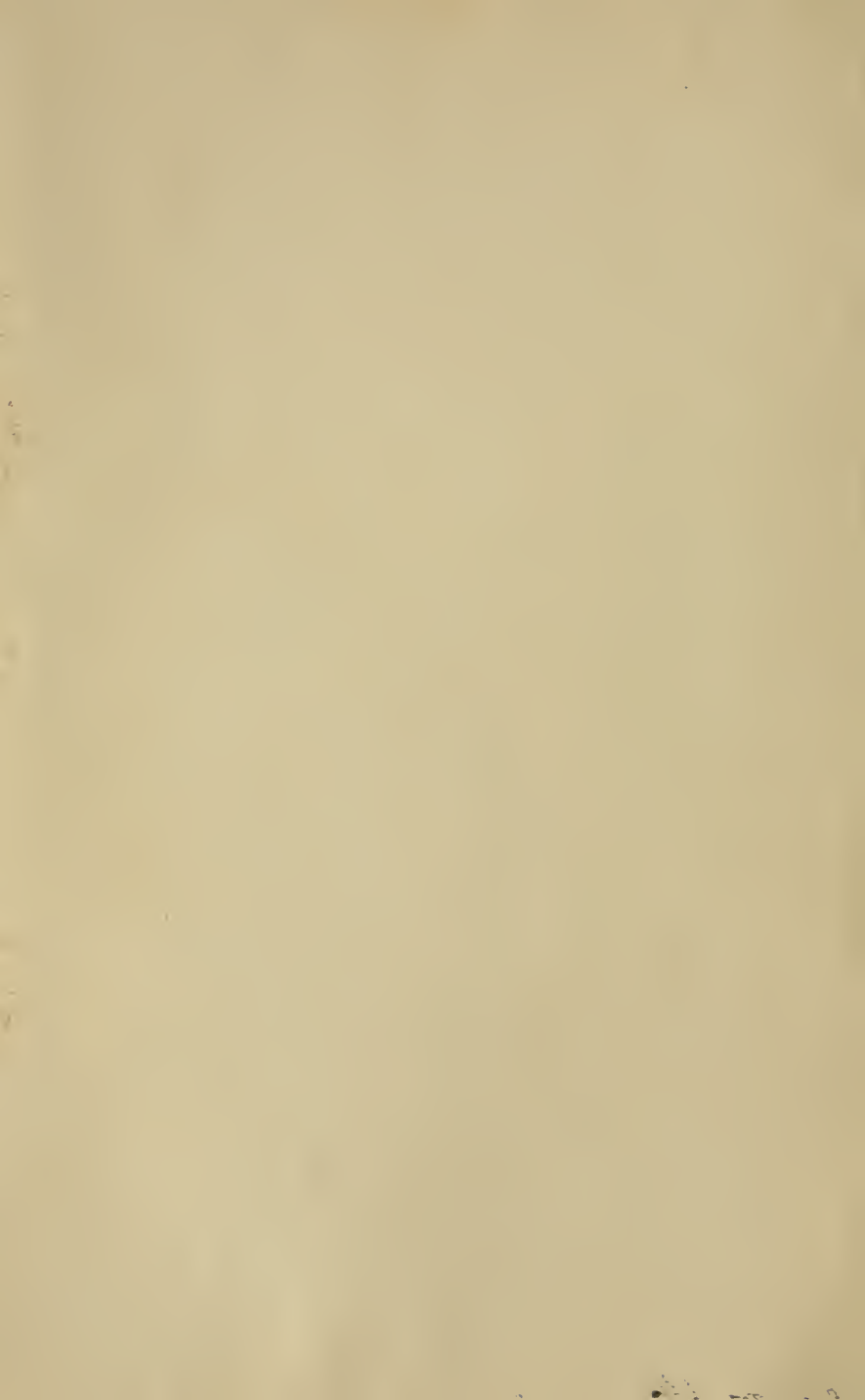




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32
*PERSONAL LOYALTY TO CHRIST THE
SECRET OF MISSIONARY EFFORT.*

A SERMON,

Preached in St. Peter's Church, Eaton Square,

DURING THE

SESSION OF THE LAMBETH CONFERENCE,

JULY, 1878.

BY THE

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PERSONAL LOYALTY TO CHRIST THE SECRET OF MISSIONARY EFFORT.

JUDGES XI. 24.

“Will not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess? So whomsoever the Lord our God shall drive out from before us, them will we possess.”

THE representation of characters and events in the historical books of Holy Scripture contrasts strangely with the treatment of the same subjects which in history, in biography, or in fiction would be natural to our own generation. From a spiritual, a moral, and a literary point of view the same contrast presents itself. The whole of our modern writing is permeated with an all-pervading self-consciousness which makes it impossible for us simply to narrate how people spoke and acted. The form of our literary activity is analytical rather than creative, and we are impelled to be always searching deep below men's words and acts to find the underlying principles on which their conduct was based. Whether our subject be the life of an individual or the history of a whole section of the human race we regard it as the concrete exhibition of underlying abstract principles. We set ourselves to analyse and discriminate the various forces whose working it displays. In the life and character of individual men we must get the abnormal actions distinguished from what was natural and uniform, we must discriminate the hereditary tendencies from those which were peculiar to the man, and again in the hereditary qualities we must mark off those which are characteristic of the family from those which are common to the nation. And so it comes about with many of

us that we move among principles and abstractions more easily than among living characters. We pass instinctively from the concrete to the abstract. We regard the men and women, nay, the nations and races of history, as the exponents of principles and the puppets of forces which they themselves had little hand in creating, and of whose working they were profoundly unconscious. How firmly soever we believe in the freedom of our personal actions, we come to ignore free-will as a factor in the larger movements of history, and even perhaps in the acts of our fellows.

The centuries which saw the production of the histories and biographies of Holy Scripture were as emphatically ages of creation as ours is an age of analysis. The actors and the events alike are presented to the mind of the reader in simple tragic guise. Men speak and act before us, they cross and recross the stage, they work out their share in the drama, and then disappear from our view ; and we are left to infer for ourselves what their motives and their characters were. Their words and their actions are given in their relation to God and to their fellow men, not to any abstract principles by which nations or individuals are noted. Yet it is impossible for us to approach them except in the spirit of our own day. It is not possible, even if it were desirable, that we should divest ourselves, when we read our Bibles, of the intellectual habits and associations with which we approach other books. We must analyse Moses or Jephthah as we should analyse Cromwell or Marlborough.

And so in the choice of my text I have tried to seize the critical moment in the development of the tragedy of Jephthah's vow. I have chosen the words which give us the key to the most extraordinary act of his life, which will show, if I am not mistaken, how the most abnormal act which he committed was but the outcome of a habit of mind by which all his conduct was noted. That habit of mind I shall hope to show you was one by no means peculiar to a rude and uncivilized age. The very same mental confusion as to the relations of truth and error in the most momentous of religious questions, which led Jephthah to sacrifice his daughter in the thought that he was honouring God, is that which inclines us to look with contempt,

on the evangelistic work of the Church. The key-note then of all Jephthah's conduct is struck in the following words:—
“Wilt not thou possess that which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess? Even so whomsoever the Lord our God shall drive out from before us, them will we possess.”

But before you can appreciate the force which they appear to me to convey, I must briefly remind you of the place which they occupy in the narrative as a whole. They are in modern political language the answer to the protocol of a foreign power. A social and a political outlaw from the circumstances of his birth and conduct, Jephthah has been called in an hour of dire need to take his place at the head of the army by which a foreign invasion is to be repelled. And the bastard captain of free-lances shows himself equal to the occasion, alike as a politician and as a general. The message of the invading monarch has challenged Israel's possession of Gilead on the ground of a presumptive right inherent in the children of Ammon. Jephthah's answer traverses the claim on the grounds on which it was put forward. But after denying that the land in dispute had ever belonged to his opponents, he leaves the ground of political prescription and falls back on the providential decrees of the divinities of Judah and of Ammon.

Israel's claim to the disputed territory is based by him on the decree of Jehovah, and the providential ordinance of the God of Israel is put forward as of equal validity with that of Chemosh, the god of the Ammonites. The two divinities are spoken of as holding an equally real place in the category of actual existences. Jehovah, it is assumed, may preside over a stronger and more warlike civilization, and the enemies of Israel may beware how they provoke the nation who honour Him. But Chemosh is acknowledged to be a god exactly in the same sense with Jehovah, to exercise a similar departmental jurisdiction, only over a different land and people. Let worshipper and worshipped then agree to a policy of mutual respect for each other's possessions and providence. Chemosh and you, Jehovah and me, and let us agree to leave one another alone.

But the king of the invading army refuses to be warned off by any such argument as this, and the question must be

settled by force of arms. And so Jephthah begins to bethink himself how most effectually to bring to bear the forces of his supernatural ally. He has boasted of the support of Jehovah, and he will have Chemosh enlisted against him. How can he make his boast a reality, and crush the invaders and their god? He knows how Chemosh will be honoured—that no sacrifice will be considered too costly, no effusion of blood too barbarous, to propitiate the deity of a people who are at best the near relations of the Moabitish worshippers of Moloch. And so he will be even with his enemies in the promises which he makes to his God.

“And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord, and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into my hands, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up for a burnt-offering.”

No reserve was made in the promise, and no scruple interfered with its fulfilment. An attempt has been made by some commentators to soften down the harshness of the story by insisting on what is told us about the daughter bewailing her virginity before the time for the sacrifice arrived, and on what is added as a conclusion—“And she knew no man.” But, on the point of the sacrifice itself, the sacred narrative is quite clear. The victim herself sees nothing strange in the fate which was to come upon her. She urges her father to be firm, and rejoices in sacrificing her life, since God has given the victory to Israel. And the consummation of the sacrifice is spoken of in the plainest terms. “And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed.”

But since it was regarded as a misfortune and a reproach that any Israelitish woman should not be among the happy mothers who filled up the ranks of the chosen people, the writer adds, to lend fresh pathos to a story which was already so touching, the thought that she never was a mother—“And she knew no man.”

Were it not for the vein of thought which appears in that

message about Chemosh and Jehovah, we should be at a loss to conceive how any Israelite could have supposed that in sacrificing his child he was honouring the Lord who spoke from Sinai; how He who gave the commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder"—He who had driven out the Canaanite nations for this above all their many sins, that they burnt their children to Moloch, could be supposed capable of being propitiated by the offering of a fair young life in fulfilment of a thoughtless vow. But if once the Giver of the Law and the abomination of the children of Ammon, had been ranked in Jephthah's thought as two beings equally real, ruling each in his petty sphere over the destinies of a single nation, it is a matter easily comprehensible that similarity of character should be ascribed to them. Other gods delighted in human blood—why, then, should Jehovah not do so? Such a thought might perhaps have been impossible among the tribes on the home side of Jordan. But Jephthah and his fellow-tribesmen were the descendants of those who were left on the wilderness side of the river: and the apprehensions of the first settlers there had apparently been but too well fulfilled. Their children had, spiritually at least, been cut off from the commonwealth of Israel.

That erroneous conception of God, and of the relations of false religions to the truth, which led Jephthah to imbue his hands in the blood of his innocent darling, stains the hands of Christian people now with the murder of souls for which Christ died. A rude age treats the deities of the heathen as though they were living realities, in the same sense as Jehovah the Lord. A refined age treats the Triune God as though He were a shadowy creation of the religious instincts of His creatures, in the same sense as the deities of the heathen. And the result in both cases is the same. It matters not whether we level up the false or level down the true. It matters not whether the territory in dispute be the actual material sovereignty over a strip of Syrian pasture, or the empire over the souls and consciences of a hundred millions of mankind. The man who has reduced all religions to a dead level of truth or falsehood, will say in effect to foreign nations—Chemosh and you, Jehovah and me—let us agree to leave each other alone: Bouddha

and Christ, the Crescent and the Cross, what are they but symbols of the Unseen? If the moral life of mankind desiderates a basis of operation in some belief in the supernatural, what matters it whether that basis be secured by this religion or that? With the advancement or the backwardness of the civilisation which is presided over by any divinity, the belief in his character and attributes will be a more or less embodiment of the best aspirations of the race. And as any belief in the Unseen is but a remnant of barbarous superstition, the wise man will be content to wait for its gradual and natural elimination. He will not trouble himself in the meantime with its being a little more adequate or a little less ridiculous. Until hard coin is paid down, any counters will serve our turn. The gold will bear our own superscription, will be stamped with the likeness of the last thinker, and carry his arms on the reverse. For the token—why, Vishnu or Jesus—one Incarnation is as good as another.

I have been putting, my friends, in all its native hideousness, the contemptuous dismissal of the supernatural, which is the logical outcome of much of our contemporary thinking on the subject of comparative religion. Few, perhaps, if any, of those who hear me would be prepared to accept, or are even accustomed to hear, such a treatment of the most sacred of subjects. But there is much loose thinking on such topics which, while it would refuse to be formulated in a distinctly anti-Christian sense, yet without fairly facing its position, assumes an attitude towards foreign missions which only such a statement could justify. It clothes itself in such phrases as these—That many a good Hindu puts the mass of us Christians to shame—That it is better to leave people alone in the system in which they have been brought up than to turn good heathens into possibly indifferent Christians—That it is more important that people should be sincere in what they believe than that they should believe exactly as we do. Or Christian charity is appealed to to induce us to leave to their idols men whom Jesus died to redeem. Or we are told that the exact form of truth which appeals to Western civilization must necessarily be quite unfitted to the subtler minds of the East; that Brahmanism is the

form of aspiration after the same Divine Being whom we worship, which has suited the Hindu mind since a period long anterior to the rise and spread of Christianity.

Well, my friends, if these things are true, we had better acknowledge at once that Christian missions are an anachronism and an impertinence, a survival of that narrow insularity which led Englishmen a generation or two back to regard Frenchmen simply as subjects for contemptuous caricatures; which thought of foreigners generally as existing to gratify British pride with a pleasing sense of superiority. Unless Christianity be in such sense true that all other religions are false; unless it is differentiated from them as being a revelation from God, while they are but blind gropings of humanity; unless it be true, as the Apostle says, that there is a dæmonic element in heathenism, even although it be a dispensation under which men are judged according to their lights,—then it is a simple impertinence on our part to offer to communicate to other nations the religion in which we have been brought up. The religions which are professed in the East have in some cases come down to their professors with the sanction of immemorial antiquity. In others they are older than Christianity, though a date can be assigned for their rise. In others, though younger than Christianity, they can lay claim to the hoary traditions of centuries of continuous existence. Is it for us then to approach men who live in the practice of such religions as these, and, stooping from the exalted attitude of a more advanced material civilization, to hold out to them, with patronising condescension, the offer of a share in beliefs which have only half evangelized our own country? Are we to ask them to abandon social customs, which are consecrated by all the associations of seventy or a hundred generations, to strip off as a mere incrustation spiritual principles or ceremonial observances which have become a part of their national life? Certainly not, if the difference between us be but a difference of forms and expressions. Certainly not, if the beings whom we worship are in any sense co-ordinate with each other. Certainly not, if absolute trust is to be found on neither side.

But we shall each of us answer these questions in accordance

with our personal attitude towards the religion of Jesus Christ. And there could hardly be a better test of our individual spiritual vitality than the state of our mind and feeling towards the missionary work of the Church. According to what Jesus Christ is to us will be our disposition towards the spread of the Gospel. What, then, are Christ and His Church to your individual soul?

Putting aside the impertinent levity which disregards Jesus Christ altogether, and dealing only with the honest and good heart which bows before the moral grandeur of the crucified Prophet of Nazareth, I would ask you individually, my friends, if you have little interest in missions, what interest have you in Christ? Do you regard Him as only the chiefest among the mighty names of the host to which you owe a reverent memory for the benefits they have conferred upon your race? Where have been those among the men before our time to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for the moral treasure they have bequeathed to us? The thrill of their self-sacrificing love has descended through successive generations till it has roused a noble enthusiasm in our own laggard hearts. The commonplace life of all humanity has been raised by their heroism or their genius to a level unattainable without them. The freshness of their thoughts, or the nobility of their sentiments, has made high thinking or devoted living seem within the grasp of thousands who without them would have been selfish and uninteresting. Is our Lord to you the greatest of these? or is He something incomparably greater? Is His life to you a great past fact, or is it something present and eternal? The grace given by a living Saviour is something different in kind from the moral thrill which is communicated from a dead benefactor and teacher. Jesus Christ can give you both. Has He given you, is He giving you, that which no benefactor can give? The influence of His Spirit in the world is still a wind that bloweth where it listeth. Do you hear the sound of it with your ears without knowing whence it cometh and whither it goeth? Or does it ruffle the mere surface of your spirit without stirring its inmost depths? Its gales are about you as you move, and you cannot but be conscious of their blowing. If they are

the breath of life to your spirit, then Jesus is your Saviour indeed.

Again, the presence of Jesus Himself is a fact in the life of the Church. Is it a fact in your personal life? Is it the very essence of Christianity to you that He takes men one by one, men sinful and unworthy as you are; that He takes you yourself and your dear ones, and knits you up into union with God? God manifest in the flesh—not for three-and-thirty years made manifest and then withdrawn into the recess of the 'Divine Unity, but God manifest in the flesh for all time as He comes to us day by day in the Sacrament of His ineffable love—God making us partakers of the Divine Nature by His exceeding great and precious promises—God projecting Himself as it were into the very sphere of human life—God moving, as in Jerusalem of old, amid the busy throng of men in the heart which He has made the throne of His sacramental Presence—God the stirring vital power of thousands of millions of hearts in all the many ages of His Church—the Son of God become the Son of Man that the sons of men might be made the sons of God—that, and nothing short of that, is Christianity. Is Christianity that to you? to be made partaker of Christ, and in Christ to be partaker of God; this is the religion of the Incarnation, this is the religion of the Gospels, this is the religion of the Sacraments, this is the religion of Jesus Christ. Take anything short of this for your fundamental conception of Christianity, take anything short of this for your personal relation to its Founder, and Christian Missions I allow may well want interest to your mind. If Christ be not your personal Saviour, your Saviour by uniting you to God, your Saviour by Himself being God in eternal union with the Father, yet man by embracing your nature, your Saviour by acting as the Mediator between the Father and yourself, then small wonder if you are stolidly indifferent to His claims upon the allegiance of the world. But if the arms which were stretched upon the Cross were the arms of God Himself opened wide to embrace all humanity in the grasp of an everlasting love, if the gulf between God and the creature was spanned when God became man, and the separation between the Sinless and the sinner was

done away by the sacrifice of the Cross ; and if all that is a fact of to-day by the power inherent in the Sacraments to annihilate time and space, if the pierced Hand reached forth in the Sacraments has been laid upon you individually, and with gentle, loving compulsion has drawn you to the riven Side, then can you, and dare you, be indifferent to the millions who know not the Saviour ? You pray Him to remember you when He cometh into His Kingdom. Then spread that Kingdom on earth by all the means in your power. You hide yourself in the Rock of Ages ; then remember the love that cleft it. It is the very meanness of basest ingratitude to accept these benefits from Him and to offer Him nothing in return. You will not, you cannot be guilty of it. Nay, if you have no wish to spread His Kingdom, it shows that you cannot belong to it. Our ingratitude as a nation and as a Church has been borne by His marvellous patience, and He is calling us still to repentance, and giving us opportunities of amendment. But our candlestick must be removed out of its place if the amendment is long delayed. Rouse thyself, then, to play a man's part in the revival of the work of God. Clear thyself at least of the responsibility of sitting still and doing nothing when God calls thee to be stirring and active. Go forth to meet the Bridegroom with thine own lamp trimmed and ready. Nay, plead with Him to hasten His coming, and set thyself to look for and hasten unto it. And, if thou art conscious to thyself of individual as of national sloth, of indifference to the pleading of thy Saviour, of want of love to the souls of men ; if thyself art responsible in any part for the judgments that are impending over the Church for souls neglected in their heathenism, and opportunities irrevocably thrown away, then join in the penitent prayer of the prophet who saw God advancing as He rode through the waters of the deep on His horses and His chariot of salvation.

“ O Lord, I have heard Thy speech and was afraid : O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known ; in wrath remember mercy.”

